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What do senior figures in Australian VET think about traineeships?

Professor Erica Smith, School of Education, Charles Sturt University

Abstract

This paper reports on the perceptions of key Australian stakeholders who were interviewed about the controversial issue of quality in traineeships. Interviews were carried out with thirteen people holding senior positions in State and national government departments, major employer and employee organisations, and peak bodies of intermediary organisations. The process was the initial phase of a national NCVER-funded project on identifying the features of high-quality traineeships. The interview transcripts were then analysed to draw out key themes. Themes included issues to do with pedagogy both on and off the job, workplace arrangements and work organisation, relationships between employers and training providers, progression to higher level qualifications and within careers, the intended strategic use of trainees by organisations, and the use of traineeships for equity purposes. On the whole, strong support was expressed for the traineeship system although there were some dissenting views. The research provided a useful backdrop for the fieldwork in the remainder of the project.

Introduction

Traineeships have been in existence in Australia for over twenty years. They were introduced following the Kirby report (1985) with the aim of extending the benefits of apprenticeship-like arrangements to a broader range of occupations and a broader range of participants. Apprenticeships had been confined very much to manual occupations dominated by males (with the exception of hairdressing) and reflected the industry structure and the organised labour influences of the mid-twentieth century. After a slow start traineeships began to grow rapidly in numbers in the mid-1990s so that today, of the 415,000 Australian Apprentices (NCVER, 2007), 245,000 are trainees with a smaller number of 170,000 traditional apprentices. The relative proportion of commencing trainees is considerably higher than apprentices, as apprentices tend to be in training for three to four years compared to one to two years for trainees. However, the days when traineeships were predominantly at Certificate II level have long passed; well over two-thirds of traineeships are now at Certificate III level or higher (NCVER, 2007).

This paper reports on the initial phase of a national research project on quality in traineeships. A range of senior stakeholders in the VET system were interviewed in depth to ascertain their views on what constitutes a high quality traineeship and how such quality features might be transferred to more traineeships. In subsequent phases of the project, not yet undertaken at the time this paper was written, six traineeship occupations have been selected for detailed case studies, each case study including a range of interviews and two company exemplars.

Background and literature review

Despite the successful establishment of traineeships as a major part of the VET system, they have yet to achieve a similar status to apprenticeships. There have been

many concerns and debates about traineeships (eg Cully, 2006; Senate EWRSBE Committee, 2000) and they are often depicted as being inferior to apprenticeships despite being included under the same umbrella with them in 'Australian Apprenticeships'. One reason for their lower status may be that in the 1980s they were viewed as much as a labour market program as a skill formation initiative. The fact that apprenticeships have always performed the same two functions has perhaps been forgotten. Traineeships are understood by many stakeholders to possess a list of disadvantages such as: a lower level qualification with a 'thin curriculum' (Smith, 2002), insufficient off-the-job training (Misko, Patterson, & Markotic, 2001), a lack of close attention to on-the-job development (Favero, 2003), a high attrition rate, and a widespread belief that many employers and RTOs are motivated to participate in the system primarily to access government funding (Schofield, 1999). Yet on the other hand traineeships have undeniably provided structured training to occupations and industries previously lacking in this advantage, and have provided pathways into higher level qualifications for many Australians. They can provide valuable training that benefits both individuals and employers (Smith, Pickersgill, Smith, & Rushbrook, 2005) and the existence of a contract of training has been shown to have a strong positive influence on the quality of learning (Smith, 2004).

Historical factors and the social construction of skill (eg Littler 1982, Korczynski, 2005, Smith 2008) go some way to explaining the antipathy of some stakeholders to traineeships. But the likelihood is that there are also some real areas of concern that require improvement. Without improvements in quality across all traineeships they may continue to be denigrated and this would be unfortunate not least for people who possess traineeship qualifications. Therefore the research project which is partially reported in this paper determined to identify the features of high quality traineeships in order to contribute to the improvement of traineeships and in public perceptions of their worth. The research questions for the project as a whole were:

- What can be described (by various stakeholders) as a high quality traineeship?
- What organisational and pedagogical features contribute to high quality traineeships?
- What are the effects of variables such as employment practices industry area, Training Package content and structure, industry traditions?
- In what circumstances are the quality features displayed?
- How far are the features replicable in other traineeships and how can this be done?

Research method

The list of senior stakeholders was drawn up in consultation with the project reference group and included the expected range of personnel from government (Federal and State), industry, trade unions and intermediary organisations. They represent the major stakeholders in traineeships (apart from training providers who were included in a later phase of the project). Table 1 shows the list of interviewees (using pre-2007 Federal Election department names). The 'ID' column assigns numbers which are used to reference points in the discussion. In total, representatives of nine organisations were interviewed, between October and December 2007, with 13 individual participants. Where there was more than one interviewee from the same organisation, the following arrangements were made. In the case of DEST and Labour Hire Co, the interviews with the different participants were carried out separately; in

the case of OTTE and Group Training Australia, the different participants were interviewed at the same time.

Table 1: Stakeholder interviewees

ID	Organisation	Position title of interviewee (s)	Reason for organisation's inclusion
1.	Australian Chamber of Commerce & Industry (ACCI)	Director of Education & Training	ACCI is a peak body for business & industry associations, and for State chambers of commerce & industry (37 bodies)
2.	Australian Council of Trade Unions	<i>Wishes to remain anonymous</i>	The peak body for Australian trade unions
3.	Department of Education, Science & Training	Manager, Australian Apprenticeships Branch & Acting Manager, VET Quality Branch	These branches of DEST manage traineeships and the overall quality of VET delivery
4.	Department of Employment & Workplace Relations	<i>Wishes to remain anonymous</i>	This branch of DEWR is responsible for monitoring the demand for, and supply of, labour in particular occupations
5.	Enterprise RTO Association	Executive Officer	Some enterprise RTOs – enterprises with ‘embedded RTOs’) - are heavy users of traineeships and have a national voice through this association (25 members)
6.	Group Training Australia	Chief Executive Officer & National Project Manager	GTA is a network of 150 group training organisations; GTOs are the direct employers of apprentices and trainees who are then placed with host employers.
7.	National Association of Australian Apprenticeship Centres (AACs)	Executive Officer	AACs ‘sign-up’ all apprentices and trainees in Australia. NAAAC (25 members) is the peak body for AACs and promotes the work of AACs & provides policy development, networking and representation to stakeholders.
8.	Office of Training and Tertiary Education, Dept of Innovation, Industry & Regional Development, Victoria	Manager – Apprentice-ship quality & services, & Manager – Training Packages	An example of a State Training Authority. STAs manage the apprenticeship system & the quality of VET delivery within their borders.
9.	Labour Hire Co (pseudonym)	Quality & Consistency Manager & National GTO Manager	A national labour hire corporation which also operates GTO and RTO functions

Note: As the relevant interviews took place before the change of government in November 2007, previous Commonwealth Department names have been used.

An interview protocol was drawn up by the project team and discussed with the reference group. The protocol was fairly loose, deliberately so in order to allow for as broad an expression of views as possible. This loose protocol was in contrast to the occupational case studies which included detailed protocols based on the project team's conception of quality which was derived from the Australian National Audit Office's three features of quality: outputs, processes, outcomes, and includes, as does the ANAO definition, consideration of the desired objectives and available resources. These features can be operationalised for traineeships as follows:

Table 1: The meaning of measures of quality for traineeships

Quality component	Meaning in traineeships
Outputs	Calibre and industry acceptance of graduated trainees Pathways to higher qualifications
Processes	Pedagogy (on and off the job) Employer-trainee psychological contract Interaction among users, providers, intermediary organisations and governments
Outcomes	The contribution of trainees to companies and to Australia's stock of skills
Objectives	Determining key objectives of the traineeship system: labour market program or skill formation?
Resources	Who should pay for traineeship training and who benefits?

The questions for stakeholders were as follows:

- What is your organisation's role with respect to traineeships?
- What are your expectations of traineeships?
- What can be described as a high quality traineeship? (Perhaps you have an example you could discuss?)
- What features contribute to high quality traineeships?
- What are the effects of variables such as employment practices industry area, Training Package content and structure, industry traditions?
- How far are the features replicable in other traineeships and how can this be done?
- What is necessary, or what needs to change, to improve the quality of traineeships?

Interviews lasted between 40 and 90 minutes and were taped (with permission) and transcribed. Two interviews took place face to face and the remainder were undertaken by phone. Several interviewees pointed out that the views that they offered were their own and not necessarily the official position of their organisations. It should be remembered that this paper aims only to report on the views of these stakeholders and is not designed to present anything beyond that. It should also be

noted that all important issues that were raised are reported on in this paper; it is not confined solely to issues of quality.

Findings & discussion

In this discussion, points are referenced by using the numbers in the first column in Table 1.

Depth and antecedents of understanding

The interviewees revealed a deep knowledge of the traineeship system. In many cases their involvement with traineeships preceded their current role and their understanding of traineeships and attitudes towards them had been formed by these previous experiences. For example, the Branch Manager for apprenticeships at DEST had been previously outposted to a State ITAB promoting traineeships. Thus their positions in policy roles were often, but not always, informed by on the ground experience. It was apparent that some interviewees had a deep commitment to traineeships; but on the other hand a smaller number were quite negative about them. One of the interviewees acknowledged that his somewhat jaundiced view was because in his role he only ever saw the problem examples. Other organisations considered traineeships to be a valid path among several that individuals might undertake.

Motivation

Several interviewees mentioned that many people involved with traineeships had a great commitment to making them work. On the other hand, there were still some employers who might 'exploit the system' (2). In the end, the quality of the traineeship depended on the motivation of those involved, including the trainees themselves. Trainees might prefer a traineeship with good training and good relationships with the various parties to one that offered better pay (1). Employers and trainees alike needed to know what they hoped to get out of the traineeship (3). The presence of 'VET evangelists' was mentioned. An example was given of a chef who had a 'Road to Damascus' experience and decided to take a more proactive interest in his trainees (8).

The curriculum

The advent of Training Packages and the standardisation among States and providers assisted with high quality traineeships; previous qualifications had often been of variable quality (3). Training Package units of competency that were not too big seemed to work well; large units were too open to interpretation and led to greater risk of low quality (8). Moreover, since people often change jobs, large units of competency created the risk of people leaving with incomplete units that could not be transferred.

RTOs should ensure that appropriate units of competency were offered to companies and to individual trainees within those companies, particularly when selecting electives (9). This relied on the company being very clear about what it wanted out of a traineeship. It also meant that RTOs needed to be committed to providing appropriate training rather than just what they had taught previously or that was

inexpensive to provide. The qualification itself needed to be appropriate; while this may seem self-evident, one interviewee mentioned an RTO that had provided people working in a factory with IT qualifications when no IT skills were used in the factory workers' jobs apart from clocking-on (8). Training Packages that provided pathways to higher level qualifications through traineeships at lower levels were valuable (6, 1). This was especially important as labour market outcomes were better for people with higher level qualifications (4). Employment incentives were now available up to Advanced Diploma Level (3).

The content of the relevant Training Package was important. The Training Package should provide for learning experiences that require a high level of 'commitment and resourcing'; it was important that traineeship qualifications were at the right level on the Australian Qualifications Framework (6). Training should be relevant to current industry practice rather than reflect historical traditions of teaching the trade (1).

A sufficient length was considered to be important for a successful traineeship (2). One interviewee gave the example of aged care. While the qualification could be achieved in less than twelve months, he said that a year was necessary to experience the different types of work covered by the qualification (7). The use of Recognition of Prior Learning processes was a complex issue, and while RPL was important in fast-tracking qualifications it needed to be rigorous (6).

In the end though, as most interviewees commented, their formal curriculum was less important than the quality of the pedagogy and the motivation of the parties. 'Training will be very carefully managed, organised and supervised; feedback given; all those sorts of things that are really important' (8). There was a view that the traineeship should provide training and not just assessment (9). It seemed that some RTOs only provided assessment services. Training Packages that provided details of assessment context were likely to lead to higher quality (8). Assessment should be complex and knowledge-based rather than just 'tick and flick' (6).

Role of on-the-job learning

On-the-job learning was seen as a fundamental feature of traineeships. It was recognised by one interviewee that a deep commitment by the employer to on the job training was less likely in traineeships than in apprenticeships. But, as one interviewee put it, 'if the training is high quality then it's a successful traineeship'. In other words the pedagogical processes in the workplace were all-important. The role of the workplace supervisor was crucial (3). Particular care needed to be taken for part-time workers to ensure that they received equivalent levels of supervision and training to full-time staff (1).

If the traineeship was primarily on-the-job, it needed to be supported by regular contact with the RTO. One interviewee maintained that a 'traineeship has 'little value' without contact from the RTO at least once a month (9). Such contact should include a 'high degree of face-to-face involvement with supported learning resources in between visits'. Such resources could include on-line, workbook exercise, and ideas for 'something the trainee can do, learn or demonstrate' (9). The trainees needed to know very clearly what they were going to learn and what their responsibilities were in relation to the on-the-job learning (3). The best outcomes were achieved where

employers were very strict about providing time away from the workstation for learning (3). Employers needed to provide rotation among departments to ensure all the necessary skills were being learned. An example was given of a quality retail program where trainees from different companies spent time in each others' workplaces (3).

Alignment of the Training Package competencies with work processes and with performance management systems, avoiding the need for a great deal of explicit instruction, was applauded by one interviewee (5). But another interviewee said clearly that 'there's a difference between training and induction; there's a difference between training and doing one's job' (8). A good traineeship would deliver skills that were broader than 'just training for their current employer' (2).

Role of off-the-job learning

Although most stakeholders maintained that in theory a 100% on-the-job traineeship could deliver good outcomes, in practice they seemed to believe that some off-the-job training was necessary. This need not be at the premises of an RTO but could be off-the-job within an enterprise. It was the combination of on-and off-the-job training, as with apprenticeships, that provided the advantage of traineeships over training that was entirely work-based or entirely institution-based (6). The off-the-job program should be rigorous. One of the interviews benchmarked traineeships in business against her own previous experience as a TAFE teacher.. She considered that current traineeships were not up to that standard of the training that she had delivered – but this was not a necessary outcome of the introduction of traineeships (9). There was some support for an initial 'block' period of training off-the-job (9) and for regular block periods where trainees were geographically isolated (3). High quality learning resources, for example on line resources, were very advantageous (5, 3), as were up-to-date-equipment at the RTO premises and well-trained teachers with industry currency (2). The new excellence rating scheme for RTOs that was introduced in the AQTF 2007 arrangements might help employers select appropriate RTOs (1).

It was considered important that employers were aware of what was being undertaken in the off-the-job training (3, 2). Off-the job training could lead to new learning being brought back into the workplace by trainees (3). This was not only the case for newly employed trainees; existing workers could 'bring those skills back into tired workplaces' (3).

Partnerships and collaboration

Nearly all interviewees stressed the importance of close partnership between the employer and the RTO (and the GTO where appropriate). Two interviewees also mentioned the learner as a partner (3, 2). The role of the monitoring bodies such as AACs and STAs was not mentioned by all, but some maintained it was important for field officers from those organisations to keep in close touch with the enterprise and the trainee. However it was also acknowledged that 'some employers say there's just ... too many players; there's always someone new walking through the door.' (7). Only AACs were officially allowed to advise on incentives and expectations and it was important that other organisations did not offer too much advice on such issues (7). In Victoria the STA tried to get involved in large-scale sign-ups with major

employers (8). Where employers maintained close contact with the RTO, there was often beneficial learning for managers and other staff within the enterprise, not just the trainees. An example was given of veterinary nurse training in Tasmania where the traineeship program offered by a particular RTO set up networks which had a widespread influence across the industry (3). While such networks may be seen as 'by-products of the traineeship program they could equally be viewed as an attainable quality feature for many traineeship programs.

Feedback to governments through the various participating bodies was seen as important. AACs for example set up State meetings where AACs invited 3 and STA personnel; similar arrangements were in place for GTOs (3). In some cases collaboration between RTOs and employers extended to use of the employer's infrastructure for off-the-job training; an example was the transport company CONEX in Victoria (8).

Learners

From the learner point of view, all agreed that a high quality traineeship benefited both trainee and employer. It was felt by several respondents that a high quality traineeship should involve the worker being retained at the end of the traineeship period and not being returned to the labour market (2). Examples were given of major companies that used traineeships as developmental routes into management (8, 3). Pathways for people without prior qualifications were also important (6). Some traineeships, particularly at Certificate II level, were eminently suitable for disadvantaged people such as the long-term unemployed, and employment services providers were encouraged to consider traineeships as a possible outcome for such clients (4). Shortage of labour in some occupations (such as cleaning and meat processing) meshed well with the existence of traineeships in those occupations (4). As unemployment was currently so low, these occupations might therefore be seen as particularly suited to people currently on unemployment and other benefits (4). More generally it was felt that traineeships allowed access to qualifications for people who would be unlikely to want to follow an institution-based pathway (3). They were also attractive compared with apprenticeships to some people who would not want to make a four-year commitment (1), and in these and other cases could provide a generalist introduction that could transfer to different occupations (1). School-based traineeships were particularly valuable in this respect (1). In many cases traineeships were associated with the first full-time job for school-leavers or for people returning to the workforce; having 'a learning environment' associated with the job made starting (or re-starting) work less stressful as the trainees felt that people did not 'expect them to know what to do from the first day' (3). Matching a traineeship to a learner was important; an example was given of horticultural traineeships which were attractive to early school-leavers but contained theoretical subjects such as botany which would be difficult for such learners (3). Thus, trainees needed to be able to examine the curriculum before signing-up.

Discussion and conclusion

Table 3, of high quality features in traineeships, has been derived from the interviews carried out. In some cases there has been a certain amount of interpretation and

deduction from the data rather than a direct transposition from the words of the interviewees.

Table 3: Features of high quality traineeships

Pedagogical	Organisational
Off-the-job training and face-to-face contact with RTO staff	A clear understanding of what is involved for all parties
Emphasis on training rather than (or as well as) assessment	A close relationship among the RTO, the enterprise and appropriate intermediary bodies
An assigned mentor and supervisor	Networking among enterprises and among intermediary bodies
Training for mentors and supervisors	Enterprise commitment to training and one where the use of traineeships is supported by senior line managers
Close supervision in the workplace	Highly skilled HR and training staff
Appropriate units of competency for the organisation and the learner	A large business environment
High quality learning materials	Opportunity for trainees to move among different departments or tasks
Cautious use of RPL and of fast-tracking	Enterprise commitment to retaining and developing staff rather than purchasing staff from the labour market
Structured training plans to manage trainees	Pathways to higher level qualifications and/or jobs

What could change to improve quality?

Interviewees presented a range of ideas about how quality could be improved. In some cases suggestions were diametrically opposed to each other. Some of the suggestions related to funding. It is felt that the current level of user choice funding is generally too low to provide proper training and support. This is particularly the case where trainees are widely dispersed. There is an argument for the restoration of funding to industries which some States have chosen to exclude from user choice funding (eg retail and hospitality). It was suggested by one interviewee that higher funding levels should be available for higher quality training. On the other hand, interviewees from one organisation suggested that traineeships provided public funding for training that would formerly simply have been on-the-job, and that therefore were not necessarily a wise use of taxpayer funds.

Funding could be uncoupled from complete qualifications and be available for shorter training periods. The funding could attach to the person not the employer so that a trainee could move to another employer, carrying with him or her the balance of the funding. This would be likely to improve completion rates. Training could be made free to trainees rather than requiring them to pay a small contribution to the RTO as is generally required.

The role of intermediary bodies was mentioned by one interviewee. There needs to be better training for staff in intermediary bodies – not focussing only on marketing. There is a need for a commitment to quality which would follow with better training for these staff. Intermediary bodies should not ‘just give them (employers) a folder and say “It’s all in there”’(8).

A few suggestions related to the role of employers. It was suggested that employers should be more accountable for their employment incentives – ie that they should need to provide evidence that they have provided good quality on the job training. Employers need to be told that taking on a trainee is a substantial commitment that involves a lot of work. One interviewee said ‘it’s like the old apprentice master’. STAs could be resourced be able to work with employers more closely. Processes could be examined so that employers have less paperwork and more real support. ‘They (employers) think they’ve earned the four and a half thousand dollars just by filling out the paperwork’ (8). In other words, employer effort gets sidetracked into the regulatory side rather than into the employment and training side.

Some suggestions suggested quite a radical change in thinking about traineeships. For example, there could be a reduction in the number of occupations that have traineeships attached to them. The focus for traineeships could be shifted more to equity groups and older workers for traineeships. For some occupations and in some cases (examples were not provided), funding could be made available for the training without the associated apparatus of traineeships. More generally, there should be an alignment of the marketing of traineeships more closely to the likely labour market demand for different occupations, and trainees should be made more aware of this.

These interviews provided a wide range of views about the traineeship system from senior people involved at a national level with the system. Several interviewees took pains, however, to point out that they have may have lost touch with operations ‘on the ground’. For this reason the next phase of the research, with organisations and people participating in the delivery of particular traineeship qualifications, will provide additional valuable data about the features of high quality traineeships. The initial interviews have alerted the project team to features that need to be explored in more detail and have provided guidance when selecting organisations for case studies.

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